Matiushenko, Afanasy Nikolaevich 1879-1907

A biography of Afanasy Matiushenko, who was one of the key mutineers on the Battleship Potemkin, immortalised by Eisenstein's film, which helped kick-start the 1905 Revolution.

Afanasy Nikolaevich Matiushenko
Also spelled Afanasiy Matyushenko, born 1879 - Kharkov, Russia, died 29 October 1907 - Sevastopol, Russia

The Potemkin mutineer

Afanasy Matiushenko was the son of peasants from Kharkov province in the Ukraine. He was born in 1879, in the village of Dergachi. His father had to give up the unrewarding work of farming to become a shoemaker.

At the age of nine, Afanasy enrolled in a village Sunday church school to learn to read, which was an uncommon opportunity amongst the peasantry.

The great famine of 1891 ruined many peasants. Afanasy's father Nikolai began to drink heavily. Afanasy had to give up school and start repairing shoes after his father's frequent bouts of drinking. At 15, Afanasy moved to Kharkhov and found work, first as a caretaker, then as an oilman at the train depot. There he often worked 6 days a week, twelve hours a day, for a pittance of a wage under brutal foremen who thought nothing of striking workers. He began to meet with other workers of a revolutionary turn of mind.

He made nightly visits back to his village. The village elders heard that he was spreading radical ideas and arranged to have him arrested. He had to flee to Odessa when he was just short of eighteen. Here he worked in the port, then became a coalman on a steamer on its way to Vladivostock in the Far East. Here he worked for two years as a machinist on the railways. He then worked as a docker in Rostov-on-the-Don. Here he joined a study circle set up by a Social Democrat. He was already well read and self-educated by now.

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He was drafted into the Russia Navy in May 1900 at the age of 21, serving in the Black Sea Fleet .

He started as a machinist and became a non-commissioned officer. He was a member of a secret group of the Social Democrats. He was called up as a naval reservist on the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5. He kept in contact with his group on land and served on the Battleship Potemkin as torpedo quartermaster.

He spread propaganda among the crew of the Potemkin and other ships of the Black Sea Fleet and succeeded in forming several revolutionary cells.

Anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker, who met him late, describes him as a “good-natured, smiling Russian peasant type; about medium height, and powerfully built.”

Crewmen organised a Ship's Commission, of which Matiushenko was the leader. When the crew of the Potemkin complained to the ship’s officers about the poor food being served, he called for an armed uprising on June 14th, 1905. Here are

Matiushenko's own words on the start of the Potemkin mutiny.

"Hearing of the unrest among the crew, the Captain of the Potemkin…sent the senior surgeon of the ship…to examine the meat. He approached the meat, put on his pince-nez so as to see the maggots better, twisted it around in front of his face, sniffed and said that the meat was very good, that the crew was merely faddy and therefore did not want to eat it. All that was necessary was to wash off the maggots with water, and the meat would be excellent…"

Captain Golikov ordered a sentry to be stationed by the meat…the sentry was instructed to write down the names of all who came to look at the meat, and afterwards to report them to the Captain".

The captain ordered that the ringleaders be shot. Matiushenko appealed to the guard with the words: "Comrades, don't forget your oath - don't shoot at our own men". The muzzles of the rifles dropped to the deck - they had refused to shoot. Matiushenko shouted: "Comrades, look what they are doing to our fellows! Grab rifles and cartridges, shoot them down, the swine".

The sailors rushed to the gun deck, seized rifles, loaded them and ran out to their comrades who stood surrounded by the guard. Captain Golikov threw himself on Matiushenko with the order: "Drop your weapons". Matiushenko replied: " I will drop my weapons when I am no longer a living being but a corpse. Get off the ship. This is the people's ship and not yours".

Matiushenko found Chief Officer Giliarovsky with a rifle in his hand, standing over the corpse of the sailor Vakulinchuk, who had been killed by him, and had been among those sentenced to be shot.

Giliarovsky shot at Matiushenko, missed and turned to run. Matiushenko shot him down.

The officers were thrown overboard.

Matiushenko was elected chairman of the Ship Committee. The Potemkin sailed into Odessa harbour. A revolt had broken out in the city as the 1905 Revolution was beginning. A mass of workers welcomed the Potemkin. Vakulinchuk's body was brought on shore and surrounded by a huge crowd. As events unfolded, soldiers and police fired on the crowd, killing 2,000.

The following morning, the funeral of Vakulinchuk took place. The authorities, terrified at further unrest, agreed immunity to sailors' delegates to head the procession, including Matiushenko. In the evening, the Potemkin fired five shells at the Town Theatre where the Military Council was meeting. A spy on board deliberately misaimed the shells. The Black Sea squadron was now sent from Sevastopol to quell the mutiny. The Potemkin ship committee went by their accompanying torpedo boat to one of the cruisers, the George, arrested the officers and put them ashore. The crew of the George joined the mutiny.

However, unreliable petty officers left on board the George succeeded in persuading the crew to change their mind. The Potemkin was forced to sail to Constanta in Romania, where the mutineers scuppered it and sought refuge ashore.

Afanasy was sheltered in Bucarest by the old revolutionary Zamfir Ralli, who had been a member of Bakunin's International Brotherhood.

Matiushenko moved from Romania to Switzerland. Here he met the leaders of the various Russian revolutionary parties, including Lenin. He was not very impressed with any of them.

He became a member of the United Sailors' Committee after his return to Romania in 1906.

He was deported to Austria-Hungary. From there he went via Switzerland to France. He was again expelled. He visited London in June 1906 and met with anarchists like the Russian Peter Kropotkin and the German Rudolf Rocker, who organised among the Jewish workers of the East End of London. Kropotkin's Russian language paper, Listki Chlieb I Wolia had its printing office in the same apartment block of Dunstan Houses in Stepney where Rocker and many Jewish anarchists lived.

Matiushenko felt unhappy and out of touch in London. He moved from there to the United States where he worked in the Singer Sewing Machine factory in New York. He met with other Russian revolutionaries in New York. The writer Maxim Gorky helped him write his memoir of the mutiny. He organised a group of Russian revolutionaries in the Lower East side where he lived, but he felt driven to return to Russia. He returned to England. His friends there warned him of the dangers he would face if he returned to Russia. He refused to listen to this

advice.

At the end of 1906 he moved back to Paris, where he organised in an anarcho-syndicalist group among the unemployed.In June 1907 he returned to Russia, intending to carry out anarchist communist activity in the city of Odessa. On July 3rd of that year he was arrested in Nikolaev. A military court convicted him of being an anarchist-communist and sentenced him to death (he was one of the 167 anarchists and anarchist “sympathisers” tried in Odessa during 1906-7 of whom 30 were hanged). He was hanged in Sevastopol on October 20th, 1907. He died like the brave man he was. He said to the officers gathered around him: "Hang me, you cowards. But know, the time will come when it will be you hanging from the lamp-posts in the street".

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